

Genealogical Proof Standard

by Dee Gibson-Roles

In today's technology-oriented society, the term "GPS" is assumed to refer to an instrument which can guide one from point A to point B. However, genealogists have their own "GPS" —the Genealogical Proof Standard —which can guide researchers as well.

Those who follow this standard can be sure that their research has a very high level of reliability, accuracy and credibility. The Board of Certification for Genealogists requires researchers who wish to be certified to demonstrate that they have the ability to perform research which meets this standard.

Regardless of whether a family history researcher desires to become certified, the standard provides guidelines which all can follow to assure the accuracy of their findings. (For those who may be interested in pursuing certification the requirements, procedures and details for certification can be found at <http://www.bcgcertification.org/index.html>.)

The Genealogical Proof Standard has five elements, which we will discuss in separate segments.

A reasonably exhaustive search

A reasonably exhaustive search is one in which a variety of different types of documents have been examined, such as county records (birth, death, marriage and land records, for example), as well as church/religious, military and census records.

If a certain type of record is missing, this should be noted along with the reason it is missing if the reason is known (for example, a courthouse fire has destroyed all records before a certain date.)

It should also be noted that examining a large number of the same type of document is not an "exhaustive" search for genealogical purposes.

For example, one might examine 50 or 100 land records for an ancestor. While this would probably be an "exhaustive" search for the person's land transactions, it is certainly not an "exhaustive" search of all possible records for the ancestor in question.

Complete, accurate citation of sources

The most important element in citing sources is to do so in such a way that another person desiring to find the same records and repeat the same research may do so without difficulty.

Few experiences in genealogical research are more frustrating than having a need to return to the original source, only to find it has been inaccurately or incompletely cited, making it very difficult to locate the source.

Failure to adequately cite sources also casts doubt on the credibility of any conclusions drawn. Well-cited sources show that the research was indeed extensive and of good quality.

Two handy tools are "Evidence! Citation & Analysis for the Family Historian" and "Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace," both by Elizabeth Shown Mills.

For style in citations, a good resource is "The Chicago Manual of Style" www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/home

Analysis and correlation

Once the research has been done, the gathered information must be analyzed and correlated. It assures that nothing of importance is overlooked and that the conclusion reached reflects all the evidence available in the gathered information.

This is one of the most important steps in any genealogical research project, and assures that any conflicting evidence is brought to light.

Resolution of conflicting evidence

Conflicting evidence may be something as minor as a two-year age discrepancy on two censuses or as major as finding that there are two possible families that the ancestor could have belonged to.

No matter how minor or major, the conflict must be resolved before a sound conclusion can be reached. It is possible that the attempt to resolve the conflict may even lead to new information that would otherwise not have been discovered.

As an example, we may think we know for certain that a particular man is the father of our great-great-great grandmother. But research produces another person of the same surname whose age and location make it possible that this man could also have been the father.

Hopefully, evidence will be found to prove which man was the father, resolving the conflict. Only then can a sound conclusion be made.

Reasoned and written conclusion

The final step in the GPS may be as little as one paragraph about an individual or it may be several pages, especially if there has been a resolution of conflicting information.

It should be a compilation of all steps taken in the research, the sources used and how any conflicting evidence was resolved.

For many researchers, family history is a hobby, and folks may wonder why they should need to write a conclusion. There are several reasons.

In all likelihood, the research will be shared in the future, if only with other family members or passed down to a specific family member. Written conclusions will assure that the person(s) receiving the information will not have to "reinvent the wheel" by repeating the same research all over again.

Making the effort to produce a coherent written conclusion may bring to light any discrepancies in the research not previously detected. And it is certainly helpful to have a written document to refer to if one has resumed research after a period of absence.